

The Medikat

Marc Bennink

In loving memory of:

Luuk Radošević

Maarten Mijer

Jan Oosterwijk

Life is impossibly complicated. Death, by contrast, is simple — disappointingly simple, thinks Minus ter Braak as he drives into the car park of the cemetery in Bilthoven. From his car, Minus scans the area left and right to see if he spots any people, perhaps acquaintances. ‘Toon van Tessel, the brother of,’ he mumbles, trying to see more than just his distinctive gait as he drives by. He noticed that gait the day before at Roemer's brother's funeral. It seems as if he's climbing stairs. He repeatedly raises his right knee a bit more than average and takes a step, then the left leg follows. Minus manages to catch a glimpse of Toon's face - deep-set eyes beneath thick white eyebrows, red spots on a potato-like skin.

Minus has always had a thing for faces and names. Ideally, he'd like to have a few basic details for every name-face combination, such as occupation, potential illnesses, a past scandal. Everything readily accessible. Minus enjoys assigning meaning to things, even when they are contradictory. He wants to label them and not just nod along with the crowd. ‘I'm bad with names,’ he'd occasionally hear someone say, of whom he strongly suspected it had more to do with laziness and disinterest than the inability to remember names or faces. He'd want to straightforwardly ask what the reason was. Minus believes that you should at least be able to recognise a fellow human being. Not that he's always that attentive himself. He can recall the moments when he was busy expounding on his own existence but made no effort to inquire about the other person's interests. In fact, when his monologue had ended and he'd made his point, he'd use the ensuing silence to make a quick exit. Visiting a funeral, like today, could also lead to some discomfort.

It's a warm autumn day. Tall bare trees dominate the view in the car park. Yet, there isn't a single stray leaf on the ground. Everything looks equally well-maintained and orderly, just like the people. He sees them walking towards the funeral centre with its grey angular shapes, dressed in black suits, dark dresses, and coats draped over their arms. The sun neatly colours the scene within the lines. Two more passers-by. Klaas-Jan's parents. The elderly couple walking diagonally to the right of his car supports each other. Minus sympathises with the old mother. It must be terrible for her to bury her son today. But that annoying, conventional stepfather, he can't stand. Why isn't he dead? If one of them appears to be turning around, Minus deliberately looks the other way, searching for a free parking spot, even though there are only eight cars in the entire lot. Minus prefers to park his car as close to the exit as possible. He doesn't need to hurry because he can see that it's not getting any busier. Yet, everyone wants to leave simultaneously after a funeral. People are emotional or don't want to spend the rest of their day here and sometimes do the strangest things. His father might have said something like that. He constantly warned about other people, people who did strange things, fooled you, or didn't tell the truth. You had to be careful around them, he thought. The whole of the Netherlands was full of such people, except in Zeeland. There, they were genuine and straightforward. In those moments, he'd simply agree with his father because he found arguing too much trouble, even though the natural urge to disagree was there, even in him. Oh, his father. He didn't really know who he was. He knew nothing about the life Minus led and the doubts he had.

Sambo One incident from those years has stayed with him. A friend, Theo, whom he had been close to since kindergarten and shared everything with, had stolen a wallet from a locker room at the football club where they both played. They must have been around fourteen years old at the time. Without telling

Minus exactly what had happened, Theo asked him to lie to the club's management about that afternoon and say that he was with Minus and not near the sports club. Minus didn't hesitate for a moment and confirmed the story. Later, it turned out that Theo had told the football board that he had heard that Jaïr, a dark-skinned boy from their team, was involved. The police found an empty wallet in Jaïr's bag on the next game day, and he was taken to the station. Jaïr was released for lack of evidence but was expelled from the football club. When Minus confronted his friend about the incident, he was told not to worry and that Jaïr was an untrustworthy 'Sambo'. When he told his father about the incident the following day and asked for advice, his father dismissed it as 'boys' pranks.' Sometimes, the past could sting you in the face. He never told his father how this history had permanently damaged his trust in Theo, no matter how much he valued their friendship. He never raised it again with anyone.

By now he's found the perfect spot. He checks his tie in the rear-view mirror because he has often appeared at official events with a poorly tied or crooked tie. And today, of all days, there must be nothing to fault. He paid extra attention at both ceremonies. Minus turns off the engine and unfastens his seatbelt. He remains seated for a moment, staring at the well-kept edge of the forest beside him. The dried mud under the felled conifers is neatly raked. A cemetery must always look well-maintained, just like the funeral itself. A tight schedule, well-equipped, so that the bereaved, who already have a hard time, aren't distracted by anything. An opportunity for a chat at the beginning, the ceremony itself, with music, of course, and then the farewell and a gathering with coffee and even something for the children. But don't funeral attendees want some distraction? The feeling that it's not all so scripted. They want to address the deceased, share their lives with others, celebrate, summarise, and not let it pass unnoticed. This

requires some deviating behaviour. Minus sighs. He wants to get out, but he sinks back into his car seat for a moment. He lowers his shoulders and blinks slowly. Every time he closes his eyes, he sees images of his friends: Johan and Klaas-Jan in France; Johan and himself on a boat in the Amsterdam canals; as young students in the Grote Markt in Groningen; Johan in a heated debate with, among others, Klaas-Jan and himself. Johan with Klaas-Jan and club members at the Molenslot estate. When he glances sideways, he sees the order of service lying on the passenger seat. In that photo, they are in a close embrace. It's a picture from right after their time in Groningen but before they started a business together. When he flips the announcement, he sees a text:

‘Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate,
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.

Playing small does not serve the world.

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking
so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine, as children do.

It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine,
we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear,
our presence automatically liberates others.’

Minus recognises the text from somewhere but can't quite place it. The words set off a whirlwind of images. He tries to stop the carousel in his head, but it doesn't happen. The impact of the death of his friends overwhelms him once more. With all his might, he tries to conjure up cheerful images, and even though he hasn't been very emotional in the past few days, he can feel that he misses Johan. Minus senses his eyes starting to burn. He takes a deep breath and steps out.

He takes a few lungfuls of the outside air, a habit left over from the cigarettes he's recently quit and slips in among the crowd. Just like at the funeral two days ago, he tries to direct his gaze just above the group of attendees, so he doesn't have to make eye contact with anyone. He's wary of semi-acquaintances asking about his long absence. Moreover, despite knowing that his ex-fiancée Sarah is abroad, he's nervous, afraid she might suddenly appear before him. He struggles with his coat at the registration desk when he hears his name called from behind. He doesn't recognise the voice alone, so he turns.

'Here we are again,' says Warner Groothuis, his friend and clubmate from Groningen. Warner's face, which usually looks somewhat wrinkled, is cheerful. He helps Minus with his coat and gently nudges him out of the group of people. Minus knows that Warner is very close to Roemer's family. After Roemer's funeral, Minus left immediately after the ceremony so he couldn't speak to him.

'It's been a long time, man. I think at least ten years since we last saw each other,' Warner continues. Minus nods in agreement but replies: 'It's still strange that the families of Johan and Klaas-Jan were able to arrange a joint farewell on such short notice.'

Warner has always liked that about him, that Minus doesn't bother justifying his absences, doesn't dodge the subject or make excuses the way most people do. Before Warner can reply, Minus continues, 'I think it has something to do with media attention. Such a plane crash with quite a few Dutch nationals on board is always big news. I even heard that another family had to postpone today's funeral.'

'I'm not sure if that's true, but I heard that one of Klaas-Jan's uncles is a former alderman here in Bilthoven, and he made sure this double funeral got priority.'

Warner puts in: ‘Oh? I heard it was because the Hardenbroek family is of noble blood and has a family tomb here.’

‘Unlikely,’ Minus says in a cheerful tone, ‘they wouldn’t associate with commoners like the Cats family.’

‘Haha, as if the nobility would suddenly become inhuman in these tragic circumstances.’

‘You would know,’ Warner says, ‘You were almost marrying into it.’

‘Touché.’

They drift away from the crowd at the entrance together. Minus continues to be amazed at how they managed to keep this double funeral out of the hands of a national disaster committee. Warner agrees, ‘Otherwise, we’d be in a big hangar at Schiphol, just like during the MH17 disaster a few years ago.’

‘That could ruin your whole day,’ Minus says dryly. He loves these kinds of clichés. He still remembers how he once shouted his favourite remark, ‘Hey, where do I know you from,’ during a Euro Championship match in Leiden in 1988 to Prince Willem-Alexander, not knowing who that blond student was. Warner wonders how something like that would continue. Do you have a joint service first and then everyone has their own funeral afterward? How did it go for that celebrity who had died in the plane crash?

‘He has his own funeral, or does he have an impresario arranging both media moments again?’

Minus looks at him questioningly. He doesn’t think his friend is the type to know folk singers, more like head chefs from good restaurants or wise old men from city councils. Not young people. Although he is the same age as Minus, he looks a lot older. Grey mane, horn-rimmed glasses with thick lenses on a prominent nose, and slightly blotchy loose skin under his

chin. In every way, a respectable gentleman, from a good North Holland family, but not of noble blood.

‘By the way, you look damn well-preserved, Minus,’ Warner says with a feigned posh accent.

‘Thank you,’ Minus replies, knowing that his friend is genuinely complimenting him. From the very beginning, he has found Warner to be one of the friendliest people he has ever met.

‘Yes, I see you hesitating, but I mean it,’ Warner continues.

‘Good to hear,’ Minus replies, already watching someone approaching Warner to greet him. Warner is tapped on the shoulder by a fat, unsavoury-looking man whom Minus can’t immediately place. The greeting is perfunctory, and the overweight man introduces a swollen woman who seems to emerge from under his armpit. It’s a good opportunity for Minus to briefly scan the crowd for any familiar faces. Warner quickly dismisses the couple, and they walk towards the hall, which has become quite crowded by now.

‘Say, Warner, at Roemer’s funeral, there was hardly any mention of their trip to Austria and why they were on that plane together,’ Minus says. ‘Or did I miss something?’

‘No, you didn’t miss anything, and it was the day before yesterday. But I don’t think it’s important. They used to fly together for work quite often.’

‘But there’s still nothing clear about their business and why they were in Austria,’ Minus persists.

Warner shrugs. ‘Plane crashes always remain vague,’ he says. ‘Do you remember that plane in Libya, with the boy who was the sole survivor, and of course, our national disaster in Ukraine?’

‘Yeah, and then the whole list comes up, Tenerife, Faro,’ Minus continues.

‘Of course it does, with that memory of yours,’ Warner interrupts him. ‘You probably even remember the years and the

number of casualties off the top of your head?’ Minus looks proud. Like a quiz contestant with the winning answer, he says, ‘Tenerife, 1977, 583 casualties, PanAm plane, many Dutch on board, Faro, 1992, Martin Air, 56 deaths, SLM Disaster 1989, Suriname, many footballers, the Bijlmer Disaster, EL AL cargo plane...’

‘I shouldn’t have asked.’

The doors to the hall open. Minus looks for familiar faces again but doesn’t see anyone right away. Then he glances at his shoes and notices they are faded and dirty. He tries to give them a quick clean by rubbing them against the back of his trousers, but then he feels a slight tap on his lapel.

‘Do you know who might be able to tell us more about that?’ Warner says, nodding upwards. ‘Maarten van Till.’

‘Oh, I see him somewhere?’ Minus asks.

‘Yes, indeed, right behind you.’

Minus turns around and looks directly into Maarten’s face. He quickly shakes his hand and greets his friend.

‘Here we are again,’ Maarten says. ‘What were you talking about? Besides the fact that we haven’t seen Mr Ter Braak for a while.’

Minus puts on a friendly expression but isn’t in the mood to respond and looks at Warner.

‘About plane crashes,’ he says.

‘Logical,’ Maarten laughs. ‘It’s good you didn’t ask him about sports scores or world records.’

‘I know,’ Warner laughs in response.

‘Well,’ Minus says, ‘we were talking about their last trip. That business visit to Austria, no one seems to be talking about it. The focus is more on the crash itself and the celebrity who was on board.’

‘Who says it was a business visit?’ Maarten remarks, giving the others a meaningful look.

‘Oh, what do you know about it?’ Warner asks.

‘Absolutely nothing,’ Maarten smiles. ‘I just mentioned Kiev and Budapest, and that should tell you enough.’

‘True,’ Minus responds. ‘But we’re back to things we already know. Isn’t it time we heard something new about them? Or is it all going to be buried in the ground soon?’

‘I’m afraid so,’ Maarten says firmly.

Warner and Minus look at their friend hopefully for a moment. He looks around somewhat nonchalantly, but his expression hints that he knows more. Minus takes in his impeccable charcoal grey suit, which might be three times as expensive as the suits of both Minus and Warner combined and tries to make eye contact with Maarten. He avoids Minus’s gaze and casually scratches the back of his head, revealing the blue-red signet ring on his ring finger. Then he suddenly says, ‘I think their wives didn’t know anything, except maybe their arrival and departure times. Beyond that, it’s anyone’s guess. And you know I don’t like guessing.’

Now Maarten looks somewhat arrogant as he glances around. It’s as if he has just shared a penetrating insight with a larger audience. Followed by a grin.

‘It’s strange to think that no one knew how far they had come or how close they were. Maybe the trip to Vienna was a breakthrough, maybe not,’ Warner says. ‘Perhaps their office here in Bilthoven can provide some answers, but what’s that worth without Johan or the others?’

‘That’s what I mean,’ Maarten mutters. ‘Guesswork.’ Warner, evidently influenced by Maarten’s comment, continues, ‘I mean, Anneloes has to determine that, but I wonder what she knows?’

‘To be honest, I’m done with it,’ Maarten says. ‘All this fuss. Nearly thirty years of working on a project, and the outcome is still unclear.’

The three of them look around for a moment. Then Warner bursts into laughter.

‘I know. It’s a cover-up! A cover-up, yes, for drugs or weapons.’

Maarten and Minus join in the laughter. The idea that the business of the three men is something other than a serious enterprise tickles their funny bones. A business that involved so much research, money, and time, and whose founders didn’t want to disclose the true circumstances, is not entirely illogical.

‘A cover-up, what a joke,’ Minus chuckles. ‘Thailand? Child pornography?’

‘Ouch!’ Warner exclaims and puts his index finger to his lips.

‘Maybe the plane was blown up after all,’ Minus says.

Maarten is now roaring with laughter. Apparently, a little discredit for the deceased, who are only spoken of in the highest regard on such a day, strikes him as extremely funny. What’s more, it’s contagious, and all three of them burst into laughter, drawing disapproving glances from those around them. Maarten coughs conspicuously into his cupped hand, pats both men on the shoulder, and leaves the group.

‘I see my father over there. I need to join him, of course.’

‘Later,’ Warner greets him, still half in laughter. ‘Noblesse oblige.’

‘Indeed, the nation’s honour comes first.’

They watch Maarten as he joins a group of men gathered around a wheelchair, in which Maarten’s father is seated. Minus notices the distinctive wooden bead necklace around Maarten’s father’s shoulders, with a twenty-centimetre-large cross asymmetrically resting on his belly. One of the men looks in their direction over Maarten’s shoulder and then mutters something in the old man’s ear. Warner and Minus exchange glances. Warner indicates that he has also seen the cross and lets out a chuckle.

‘Quite religious, those Van Tills,’ he dryly remarks.

‘Very religious,’ Minus agrees.

‘It’s a shame that things never quite got back to normal between Maarten and Johan,’ Minus concludes. ‘Now it’s definitely too late.’

The music in the hall gradually swells. People start to move and enter the hall.

‘And now those coffins still need to be brought in,’ someone softly quips among the attendees. Minus has temporarily forgotten the introduction of this classical piece, but after a few chords, he clearly recognises Don Giovanni.

Who liked opera between those two, Minus wonders.

‘Johan,’ someone answers for him.

Nonsense, in all those years he has never heard Johan mention an opera, let alone attend one. He remembers an evening with Johan and his wife Anneloes in Rome. That must have been around the turn of the millennium. Don Giovanni at the opera house in Rome. Everyone in evening dress and black-tie. He recalls how he had gone alone to the opera house, first taking a taxi, and then strolling through Rome. No, he had gone alone to the restaurant where Johan and Anneloes were, and together with them to the opera, that’s how it was. He was alone because things had fallen apart with Sarah, and he had been invited by Anneloes, not out of pity, to spend a few days in Rome with Johan. Unusual trip. Anneloes must have found it exceptional, which is why she chose it. Klaas-Jan certainly wasn’t a fan; he had no interest in classical music. In fact, Don Giovanni is not suitable for a funeral. Something like The Magic Flute or the Requiem would be more appropriate, but Anneloes must have had her reasons for choosing it.

Anneloes and Johan, who were already inseparable back then, knew they would be bound to each other for life. Was it a good marriage? Would she ever accept a new man in her life? Strange thoughts on this funeral day. Although, life and death always come together on such a day. Anneloes is certainly not preoccupied with that. Her days now revolve around this event

and the many matters concerning Johan's life and work. When they spoke on the phone about Johan's death and that of his friends, she had already asked Minus about it. If he would help her sort out the many questions that were coming her way. She knew Minus had to know more about it, at least more than she did, and she had mentioned that he was one of the few she trusted. He had initially deferred, but he knew she would come back to it quickly. It only now occurs to Minus that both coffins are the same, and he imagines what it would be like if both men were buried in the same casket. Wouldn't that do more justice to their friendship, their lives, their long collaboration? The music is faded out, and it becomes completely silent. A disappointing nothingness, no sound, no image. Nothing.

On the front row, three seats to the left of Anneloes, someone rises. The families are clearly in control of the proceedings themselves, as the usual funeral directors are nowhere to be seen. A well-dressed man with a solemn demeanour steps up to the lectern with a few folded A4 pages. Minus looks around. Many stern faces; at the front rows, there's a lot of grief and shaking shoulders. Hundreds of thoughts inside all those heads. Thoughts about the deceased, the bereaved, but probably also a few preoccupied with other matters: their work, their own families, how long this will take. Minus is now openly ogling some women. As he observes the various ladies, names roll through Minus's mind one by one. Antoinette, Marie-Christine, Sarah... sweet Sarah. His great love. He remembers vividly when he first saw her. At Molenslot, in the early '80s. Johan and he had been invited to the family Van Raaders' estate by Maarten, somewhere in the east of the country, via their year club. That day and evening, he had tried to woo a friend of the Van Raaders, but the first glimpse of Sarah had left the deepest impression.

She'd been very young at the time and had to leave the party early. He had often thought about her delightful presence,

leaning on an old fountain. The man in the foreground, next to the coffins, clears his throat.

II August 2, 1980

A bright summer sun illuminates the Grote Markt of Groningen. The stately grey city hall is surrounded by various stalls, not market stalls this time, but displays with brochures about everything there is to experience in the city of Groningen and its university. The terraces are packed, with most tables adorned with large glasses of beer. A few are for tourists, a few occupied by residents, called Stadjers, but most are taken by students who have settled around the old city hall, like seagulls on a rubbish dump. Carrying a stack of brochures from various student associations, Minus makes his way to the centre of the terrace, across from the Grootte Griet café. Seated in the wicker chairs around a small table are his new friends, whom he spoke to for the first-time last night. He had made contact through a network of student houses that were hosting lodgers during this period. It's KEI week, the university of Groningen's introduction period, and these are the days when it must happen: becoming a member of a student association or not. Throwing yourself into new study period or immersing yourself in the student life of the city of Groningen, ran without closing time.

According to his father, there was no choice in the matter. You study during the time allocated for it. Minus didn't care what he did beyond that. If he didn't become one of those obnoxious fraternity members who think they're above everyone else. However, Minus had already made his decision. He wanted to join a student club, and he would figure out his studies along the way. Groningen couldn't be much farther from Vlissingen, and that suited him just fine.

‘Môge!’ Minus enthusiastically calls out to the guys as he approaches the table.

‘Hey, Soldier of Orange, we don’t say that here; that’s Leiden,’ comes a voice from one of them. ‘Groningers say ‘Atjoo’.’

Minus laughs back at Jeroen, a big guy who’s in his second year. He didn’t join Vindicat last year because he wanted to quickly get his propaedeutic degree, although that didn’t quite work out.

‘Really? Dr. Anders, do you have a brother studying here, because you seem to know everything?’ Minus responds.

The others at the table laugh, and one of them, Teun Troosthof, known as Teun Korsakov from high school, adds, ‘Hey, Minus, grab a chair, and I’ll order more beer.’

‘By the way, Jeroen is already a second-year student,’ someone calls out. ‘You’ll hear that plenty.’

Teun had won Minus over the night before by turning up with crate after crate of beer. He was from Warmond, every inch the well-to-do Leiden type, and dressed, despite the heat, in a stiff-collared sailing jacket with the sleeves rolled up over forearms like cable, clearly built by years on the water. They look like cables. Now, one of those arms gracefully rises, and without even looking, he expects to be served at any moment. Strangely enough, it works. Minus drops his stack of brochures on the table and quickly pulls a chair towards himself. He’s been sweating all morning, and his thirst for beer is insatiable.

‘Hey, Minus, what are you planning to study?’ asks the guy in front of him, introducing himself as Maarten van Till.

‘History.’

‘Wow, exciting!’ says Maarten with a hint of sarcasm. ‘You might be the only one.’

‘Oh, really? What are the rest of you studying?’

‘Almost everyone is studying law or economics. I’m doing economics myself.’

‘Except Johan,’ Teun chimes in. ‘He’s studying medicine.’

‘Medical school,’ someone corrects.

‘Where’s Johan, by the way?’ Maarten asks, looking around. ‘Wasn’t he supposed to join us?’

‘Oh, already missing your buddy?’ Teases Teun.

‘Shut up.’

Teun explained, for Minus’s benefit, that Johan and Maarten knew each other from Heemstede, same secondary school, three of their four parents old Groningen fraternity members, and the two of them had agreed years ago to study here together. The only real difference between them was their choice of study. Maarten primarily studies economics to maintain his family’s status and wealth, while Johan is pursuing medicine to delve into science.

Minus likes the way Teun explains things. He exudes confidence, making it easy to believe what he says. Minus didn’t have friends like this in Middelburg. The guys he went to high school with there were always reserved and didn’t talk much, which Minus didn’t like. Although he wasn’t particularly articulate during his teenage years, he now found it important.

‘So, Johan has a mission,’ Minus observes.

‘A mission?’

‘Yeah, studying medicine is for people who know what they want to do later. Becoming a doctor is a calling, and for studies like ours, we’ll figure things out later.’

‘Watch out, gentlemen,’ Teun says aloud, ‘This Minus here has it all figured out, so be careful what you say.’

Minus is glad he has made a good impression and starts to feel at ease. Without having to go into detail about his background or hometown, he can be himself in this company. Honestly, a few days earlier on the train ride here, he couldn’t have imagined it.

Now Charly arrives with a newcomer in tow. ‘Klaas-Jan Hardenbroek,’ he introduces himself.

‘With Klaas-Jan, I was still drinking yesterday when most had left,’ Charly boasts. ‘He’s staying on Zuiderdiep.’

Klaas-Jan looks faintly awkward as he gazes at the group of students around the terrace table. Together with Charly, they join the vacant table with two chairs. This provides Maarten with the opportunity to sit closer to Minus and inquire about his temporary accommodation. When Minus mentions that he's staying at Westersingel, not number 39 but number 26, Maarten appears somewhat disappointed. Minus explains that there's hardly ever anyone at home and that he got the address through a friend from Vlissingen who is almost done with his studies.

‘Alright, a quiet place then.’

Minus had no idea, until now, how many student houses there are in this city, as he hears the names roll past: H.W. Mesdagstraat, Josef Israëlsstraat, A-Kerkhof, Vismarkt, Poelestraat, and especially who the guys knew to secure a spot there. From their stories, he understands that having a lodging address may not guarantee a place in a fraternity house. Maarten now explains in detail how the selection process in the various fraternity houses works. A house and a club become your life in Groningen, and reputations from before your student days no longer matter. You start completely fresh, so the upcoming days, signing up for Vindicat, and, most importantly, surviving the introduction camp are crucial. Minus eagerly absorbs every word of it.

‘Where are you from, by the way?’ Charly asks, grinning at him. ‘Wait, let me guess? Your accent sounds somewhat below Rotterdam, right?’

‘Exactly, far below Rotterdam,’ Minus laughs.

‘Damn,’ he says. ‘Minus, that seems a typical name from Zeeland, doesn't it?’

‘That's right. I'm from Middelburg, born in Vlissingen,’ he says with a Zeelandic accent, pronouncing Middelburg as Meddelburghù and Vlissingen as Flessingen.

‘Wow, that's quite a distance,’ Maarten exclaims. ‘I find Groningen far, but you're on a four-hour train ride.’

‘Longer if I’m unlucky. And what about the rest of you?’

‘Amsterdam,’ says Charly. ‘Don’t ask me why I’m here because I don’t even know.’

Klaas-Jan laughs. Jeroen reveals he’s from Enschede, Teun is from Warmond, near Oegstgeest, and Warner, like Charly, is from the capital. In the middle of Klaas-Jan’s sentence about his high school years, Maarten suddenly exclaims, ‘There he is.’ The guys all turn their heads in the direction of his outstretched arm. Across the Grote Markt, a distinctive, lanky figure is walking. He shields his eyes from the bright sun with his hand and looks around. He also has a stack of brochures in his hand, which he collected at the various stalls. Minus notices how calmly he walks and how thoughtfully he surveys the surroundings.

‘Hey, Johan,’ Maarten shouts a bit too loudly. ‘We’re over here!’

‘Definitely Vindicat,’ Minus hears someone mutter nearby, catching sight of an older man’s irritated glance. The tall figure is closer now and lifted a hand slowly in greeting. As he reached the table, Maarten makes the introduction: ‘Gentlemen, may I introduce you: Coming from Heemstede, which is not unimportant by the way, and one of the funniest and smartest people I know, Johan Cats.’

Johan circulates the table, and Minus is immediately impressed by his modest demeanour and down-to-earth gaze. Handshakes are deliberate. He holds each hand for a good minute and looks everyone over, even those he already knows. Moreover, he doesn’t worry about finding a seat and calmly continues browsing through his brochures. ‘Take a seat here, Johan,’ says Maarten. ‘I’ll get some more beer.’

‘The caring friend,’ Teun says. ‘Let the guy find a chair on his own; they serve on the terrace, you know.’

Charly agrees with Teun and adds, 'Are you going to wipe his bum for him, Maarten?'

'Noblesse oblige,' he responds.

Something in Maarten shifted the moment Johan arrived, Minus noticed, and Johan, for his part, sat down right next to him. There wasn't time to say much, though, because Charly is already on his feet, calling for quiet, Maarten instructed to sit and stay put.

'Gentlemen,' Charly begins, 'If we, the prospective members of Mutua Fides, were to entertain the idea of forming a club right here on the spot, I believe I see the core of this year's group in front of me.'

'We're not even members yet,' Klaas-Jan points out.

'And that's absolutely correct, Charly,' Teun says. 'But...' At this last word, he takes his glass from the terrace table. '...you're right, cheers, guys, I'm in.'

Jeroen, Maarten, Klaas-Jan, Minus, and the rest follow his example.

'Maarten, please sit down now,' says Klaas-Jan. 'The beer will make its way over here, for sure.'

Minus looks around. Could it be true? That he has found a connection to a group of friends here without too much fuss, who might become a year club of the fraternity in the future. He is happy.

'Atjoo!' Jeroen exclaims.

That same evening, Minus walks from Westersingel towards the Grote Markt. He has caught his breath for the next round at the society. Under the HOOGHOUT logo, from the eponymous Northern Dutch gin maker. During the afternoon's festivities, in his inebriated state, he had already pondered this, but now he realises how well everything is going during these first days of the initiation period. Naturally, he comes from a different background than these boys from Heemstede, Het

Gooi, or Wassenaar, but he can easily keep up in terms of humour and intelligence. And what do these preppy guys know about real life? Were they present at the Amsterdam coronation riots last April? Did they understand anything about the life of Bishop Romero or the boycott of the Olympic Games in Moscow? No, he didn't hear them talking about that. With his perspective on the world, he'll surely amaze them. Contentedly, he rushes across the gleaming cobblestones of the market square towards the society with its stately large balcony, from which the noise is already emanating, and where many people from Groningen believe that these students quite literally feel superior to the common city crowd.

With brisk steps, he bounds up the steps of the society building. He found a jacket and a tie in his sparsely furnished student house and decided he could borrow them for the evening. The hall of *Mutua Fides* is large, but not quite as he had imagined it to be for a student association that has been around for so long. It has a bit of a factory hall feel to it, he thinks. A bit rough, lacking history. But the smell of beer and cigars seems to have been etched into the thick wooden floors for eternity. It's particularly crowded on the stairs leading to the conversation room, CZ for short, because it's the initiation period for the whole city. You don't need to be a member to get in, and the strict rules associated with membership don't apply on these nights. With a sizable group of students, he passes through the heavy doors of the CZ and enters the room. It's chaotic and crowded, and this first encounter lives up to his expectations. Over the heads of hundreds of students, he spots a gigantic fireplace at the end of the room. The area around the fireplace is reserved for prominent members. They sit in wooden chairs, looking amused at the teeming crowd. The spectacle intrigues him. What would it be like here once the wheat is separated from the chaff, and only the true members of the association remain?

Then, to his left, he spots a bar. The beating heart of student life was explained to him yesterday, but he's never seen one quite as impressive as this. You must ascend a few steps to reach the bar, and therein lies the challenge. Trying to manoeuvre as a newcomer among the members is not an easy task. From a distance, the students seem like termites scurrying over each other to secure a spot. Simply placing an order is difficult, let alone staying there for a conversation. And it's even more challenging near certain sections of the bar where blue and pink waistcoats of the room commissioners rule the roost. Minus watches as a burly blond-haired guy in a blue vest forcefully pulls someone off the bar and pushes them off the stage with an unabashed movement. Other vested individuals follow him to fill the gap behind the big guy. They all raise their hands and shout, 'Oh yes, sorry, it's Kei-week, you damn pleb!' and laugh as they return to their spots.

Just behind this scene, Minus recognises Teun, who is cheering with others near the stage. Next to him is Jeroen, who stands out, and Charly and two more. Minus is immediately pulled into this circle by his jacket.

'This is Minus,' Teun shouts, spinning him around. 'You know Jeroen and Charly; this is Jonathan, Charly's roommate and a member of Vindicat.'

Minus shakes Jonathan's hand. 'Hey, man,' he says. 'Jonathan, third year HFT.'

'And these are Warner and Willem, prospective members.' Handshakes are exchanged, and there is some shouting. Minus is handed a plastic cup with beer. 'Ad fundum!' Jonathan exclaims, holding the cup close to Minus' face. Warner makes a gesture that suggests the glass should be downed in one go, and Minus complies.

'Perfect,' Jonathan says, immediately pointing to Teun. 'New beers!'